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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001198

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SUBJECT: ASEAN PERSPECTIVES ON BURMA: PART II

REF: A. RANGOON 1053

[1](#)B. RANGOON 973

Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassadors of Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, like their ASEAN colleagues (ref A) encourage U.S. engagement with the Burmese regime, but share generally negative views on the current situation and prospects for progress in Burma. Of this group, only the Thai Ambassador appears to be making any effort to actively engage the GOB. His focus appears narrowly limited to keeping the Burmese in Burma. End Summary.

THAILAND: KEEP THE BURMESE IN BURMA

[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador Suphot Dhirakaosol, posted to Burma for about a year and a half, told the Charge during a mid-September call that a 2,000 km common border is a primary concern that drives Thailand's policy of engagement with the Burmese regime. If the political crisis in Burma persists, Suphot said, those who flee Burma won't go to China or India, they will head straight for Thailand. Therefore, Thailand wants to help Burma develop in order to reduce current and potential border problems. The Charge observed that not all issues respect borders, such as disease and narcotics, and encouraged Thailand to seek real, meaningful reform in Burma. He described a plan to establish hospitals on the Burmese side of the border that met Thai standards. Unfortunately, he rued, the GOB had expressed little interest.

[1](#)3. (C) Suphot said that Thailand had concluded it could only encourage gradual progress in Burma. "We can't change everything in one day," he said, acknowledging that the Burmese military was intent on keeping power by denying the population the opportunity to access information and to develop. He described ongoing efforts to bring Burmese military officers to Thailand, but said the senior leaders would not permit subordinates to travel. Even senior leaders would not travel, like their ASEAN counterparts, he said, "because they never change." He demurred when the Charge asked if Thailand saw any results from its Burma policies, but added that the RTG only made "suggestions" to Burma because "the generals don't respond to pressure." Suphot added that Thailand tried not to do anything that the regime would consider as interference, "since we must avoid causing problems that will send more refugees, and spread insecurity, into Thailand."

[1](#)4. (C) The Charge said that Thailand has many important lessons to offer Burma, particularly having shifted from military to civilian rule. She encouraged Suphot to note to his GOB interlocutors that all the other ASEAN countries had opened up to the outside world, and yet Burma remained closed and therefore increasingly impoverished. Suphot agreed, noting that he would encourage the Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation "to give the Burmese people opportunities." He subsequently told Charge that Thailand had proposed to establish plantations in Burma, where Thai wages would be paid to keep Burmese in Burma. However, he acknowledged that the Thai private sector was reluctant to invest here without guarantees because of the bad investment climate. Asked if the GOB would honor any guarantees, he admitted that was a problem.

INDONESIA: HAVE PATIENCE

[1](#)5. (C) Indonesian Ambassador Wyoso Prodjowarsito, in Rangoon for over two years, urged "patience" in dealing with the Burmese regime, referring repeatedly to the regime's road map to democracy and related assurances regarding an eventual political transition. "We must wait for a draft constitution to emerge from the National Convention process," he urged. Prodjowarsito also said the international community needed to wait for a referendum on the constitution, "which should include all Burmese people." He added, however, that "of course, Aung San Suu Kyi should be released" and bemoaned his perceived inability to effect change. "Everything," Prodjowarsito predicted, "will be the same after two days, two months, two years."

[1](#)6. (C) Prodjowarsito said that (former Indonesian Foreign Minister) Ali Alatas had been pleased with his meetings with regime leaders during an August visit to Burma (ref B). The

Ambassador said, however, that Alatas had come only on UN reform business; it was "not good timing" to bring up democracy issues. The Charge noted the relevance of Indonesia's successful experience in adopting democracy through multiparty elections. Suggesting that the GOI could offer a helpful model to the GOB, the Charge noted that the Indonesian military, like the SPDC, had once claimed that only the armed forces could keep the country together. On advice of former President Megawati, replied Prodjowarsito, he had himself offered Indonesia's help during his meetings with the GOB. They just smile, he said, and say "thank you."

17. (SBU) According to Prodjowarsito, Indonesia has only three investment projects in Burma and a small amount of trade. Indonesia does not need to do business in this difficult environment, he said, because of its own big domestic market. Furthermore, constantly changing economic policies and limited bank relationships create a challenging business climate. Besides, he added, Indonesian businessmen have "never heard of Myanmar, they only know Burma." The Charge asked if the GOI sponsored any training, and Prodjowarsito replied, "Who would we send? There is no Parliament here."

VIETNAM: WE CAN'T, YOU SHOULD

18. (C) Ambassador Tran Van Tung, a recent arrival in Burma, warmly welcomed Charge referring to improved relations between the US and Vietnam, as reflected by the recent visit of the Vietnamese Prime Minister to the U.S. Charge noted that Vietnam had become a growing, dynamic economy that could offer useful lessons to Burma. He responded that the international community had helped Vietnam, and urged the U.S. to make the first move--"if the U.S. is not willing, then the military will not be either." He added that punishing the Burmese serves no useful purpose. He acknowledged that the regime's focus on political stability, posed many difficulties and that too much fear over change usually results in nothing being accomplished.

19. (C) When queried about Vietnamese messages to the Burmese leadership, Ambassador Tung cited visits by Vietnam's Prime Minister and former President. He said that they urged the regime to open up citing Vietnam's own experience with sanctions. Vietnam had decided to open up to the outside world and then the international community responded. Vietnam, he averred, would only move forward; Burma should follow suit and become part of the international community. Beyond visits, the Ambassador indicated relations were minimal. Since both are basically agricultural nations, trade has been modest. Although it has potential, "business in Burma is difficult."

110. (C) Tung said he had had a 30-minute meeting with SPDC Chairman Than Shwe rather than the usual 15 minutes, but offered no details, and agreed with Charge that the Cabinet Ministers appeared to have little influence. He insisted that high-level Burmese officials understood the need for their country to open up and know they cannot develop otherwise. When urged to repeat that message to the regime, he replied that the U.S. is the appropriate country to send a message. He said that Vietnam would be willing to share its experiences with the GOB, but expressed doubts that Burma would use his country as an example.

LAOS: "WE DON'T CARRY GUNS INTO TEMPLES"

111. (C) Lao Ambassador Chanthavy Bodhisane, an almost invisible member of the diplomatic corps during his four years in Burma, indicated that he spends most of his time playing golf. Admitting he rarely sees any GOB officials, he relies on his household staff for information about current events. He said his staff was very loyal because he gave them rice. There is little bilateral trade, he said, and no bilateral counternarcotics cooperation. (Note: DEA Rangoon recently participated in a major heroin seizure in cooperation with Lao, Chinese, and Burmese authorities. End Note.) The strongest tie between the two countries is Buddhism, which results in a modest number of Laos traveling to Burma. Asked to compare the two countries, Bodhisane offered, "we don't carry guns into temples," referring to the common practice observed by many Burmese military officers of always wearing weapons.

CAMBODIA: LOWEST PROFILE OF ALL

112. (C) While the Charge has yet to call on Cambodian Ambassador Hul Phany, she has already met him socially on numerous occasions. He never has anything to say about current events in Rangoon, but is always quick to volunteer to sing at any event. Numerous of his staff, including his own son, want visas to the U.S. for their children.

COMMENT: COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE

113. (C) Each of the ASEAN Ambassadors advocates engagement with the Burmese regime, while admitting they have little to

show for it. Of this group, only the Thai Ambassador has made any real effort to reach out beyond former PM Khin Nyunt, deposed over a year ago. The rumor mill has it that Ali Alatas did not even bother to debrief the Indonesian Ambassador about his visit. While it is true that Thailand's pragmatic approach has, for example, achieved an uneasy peace along its common border with Burma, the SPDC has dismissed all Thai efforts aimed at political reform (the regime's rejection of the Bangkok Process comes to mind). Nonetheless, we believe that the ASEANS have a comparative advantage in being able to demonstrate to the Burmese regime that opening up can bring increased prosperity, and that stability can be maintained as militaries yield to civilian governments. End Comment.  
Villarosa